LITERARY HISTORY / BIBLIOLOGY / POLITICS / ECONOMICS

Mixing anecdote and advocacy, this polemical essay offers an introduction to the concealed history of do-it-yourself publishing—as undertaken by some of the most revered writers of the modern Western canon. In looking back at some of those literary monuments, it also looks forward to the political praxis of the 21st-century's digital future.

REMEMBER
THE LESSONS OF LITERARY HISTORY.

DON'T WAIT FOR OTHERS
TO VALIDATE YOUR IDEAS.

DO IT YOURSELF.

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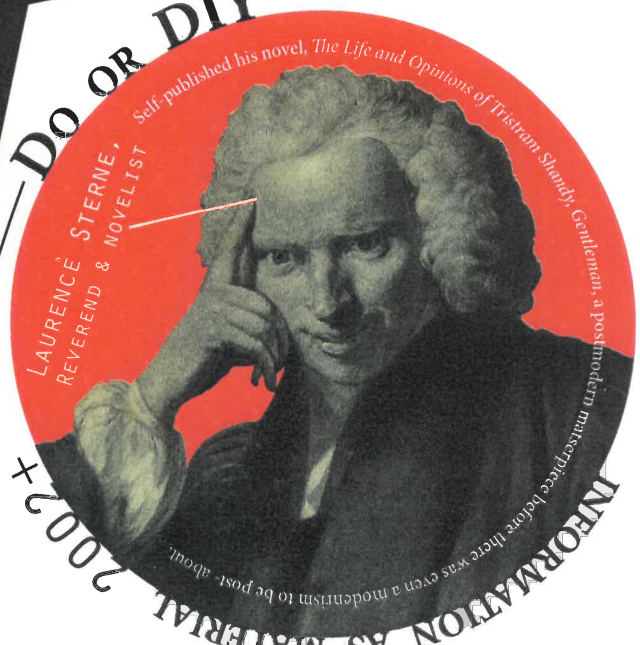
LAURENCE STERNE,
REVEREND & NOVELIST
Self-published his novel, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, a postmodern masterpiece before there was even a modernism to be post- about.

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Cover image mezzotint by Edward Fisher from the *Landsdowne Portrait* (1760) of Laurence Sterne by Joshua Reynolds, courtesy of the Laurence Sterne Trust, Coxwold.

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This book is dedicated to everyone who has advanced literature by self-publishing, and who, in doing so, has moved beyond the horizons of a myopic literary industry.

Institutions cannot prevent
what they cannot imagine.

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1. History

In 1759, Laurence Sterne, soon to be Minister in the North Yorkshire village of Coxwold, borrowed money from a friend to finance the publication of his first novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. When overseeing the printing, he made certain that the title page gave no indication of where the book was printed, since the London elite turned up their noses at provincial publishers. That provincial book is now of course a cornerstone in the Western literary canon. It stands, according to the Italian writer Italo Calvino, as the progenitor of all experimental literature.

• • •

At the age of eighteen, Derek Walcott borrowed money from his mother to pay the Guardian Commercial Printery in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad for his vanity-press first book of *25 Poems*. He peddled them himself, hand-to-hand. Later an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992.

• • •

When no press would publish it, and no magazine would serialize it, Stephen Crane borrowed $700 from his brother and published his first novel himself, under the pseudonym Johnston Smith. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, considered the first work of literary Naturalism, is now a canonical touchstone for American studies.

• • •

In 1517, Martin Luther published his ninety-five theses as a site-specific installation at the Schlosskirche Wittenberg. A co-operative

of friends, using the new technology of the printing press, distributed translations throughout Europe. The Protestant Reformation followed.

• • •

Walt Whitman not only financed the first printing of *Leaves of Grass*, he also helped to set the type and pull the pages himself from the press at a local shop, whenever the job printers took a break from their regular commercial work.

• • •

With the help of his professor Philip Green Wright, who had a Gordon jobber platen press in the basement of his family home, Lombard College student Carl Sandburg set the type, printed the sheets, and bound fifty copies of his first book of poetry, *In Reckless Ecstasy*. He would go on to win three Pulitzer Prizes.

• • •

Tristan Corbière, son of a bestselling novelist, himself remained an unknown and struggling writer, finally saving enough to pay to have a slim volume of verse, *Les amours jaunes*, published just before he died of tuberculosis in 1875. His posthumous apotheosis in Paul Verlaine's landmark anthology *Les Poètes maudites* canonized him as the Symbolist master he is recognized as today.

• • •

In the winter of 1912 Marcel Proust submitted a manuscript to three prominent Parisian publishers: Fasquelle; Gallimard; and La Nouvelle Revue Française. Within weeks, all three had rejected the project. Fasquelle explained that they "did not want to risk publishing something so different from what the public was used to reading." That 'something different' was the monumental modernist novel *In Search of Lost Time*.

Soon another publisher, Ollendorff, had also rejected the manuscript, despite Proust's offer to pay for the printing himself. Alfred Humblot, a Director at Ollendorff, rebuked: "I don't see why any man should take thirty pages to describe how he turns over in his bed before he goes to sleep." The book was eventually published by Grasset, but only after Proust agreed to finance both the production and publicity. André Gide, who had been the editor at La Nouvelle Revue later confessed: "the rejection of this book will remain the most serious mistake ever made by the N.R.F. — and (since to my shame I was largely responsible for it) one of the sorrows, one of the most bitter regrets of my life."

• • •

Nathaniel Hawthorne paid $100 to have his first book, *Fanshawe*, published anonymously.

• • •

In 1892, Paul Laurence Dunbar, earning four dollars a week working as an elevator operator in Dayton, Ohio, borrowed $125 to publish his first book of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*. He became an instant literary celebrity, and inaugurated the African-American poetic tradition.

• • •

Raymond Roussel — a key influence on Marcel Duchamp, Michel Leiris, John Ashbery, the Surrealists, the OuLiPo and Les Nouveaux Romanciers — self-published his astonishing novel *Impressions d'Afrique* [*Impressions of Africa*] in 1910. The title is a homophonic pun on the phrase "impressions à fric": a printing at the author's expense.

• • •

Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Jane Austen, George Meredith, Beatrix Potter, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Rudyard

Kipling, Nikolai Vasilevich Gogol, Italo Svevo, A. E. Housman, Kate Chopin, Charles Ives, Edgar Rice Burroughs, D. H. Lawrence, Edith Sitwell, Nancy Cunard, Anaïs Nin... all did it themselves, at their own expense, publishing in advance of others' validation.

• • •

Following on the DIY ethos of the mimeograph revolution, Language Poetry — the most important literary movement of the later 20th century — flourished when authors established their own presses, distribution networks, journals, reading series, and bookshops. Susan Howe's Loon Press, Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press, Johanna Drucker's Druckwerk, and dozens of others in tandem altered the course of contemporary literature, whilst commercial publishing plodded on, oblivious and unchanging.

• • •

In 1931 Gertrude Stein sold a painting by Pablo Picasso, *Woman with a Fan* (now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.) to finance Plain Editions, the imprint under which her partner Alice B. Toklas would further Stein's work.

• • •

That same year, Irma Rombauer self-published a cookbook for the First Unitarian Women's Alliance of St. Louis, Missouri. The *Joy of Cooking* currently sells over 100,000 copies a year.

• • •

In 1961 the poet Ian Hamilton Finlay co-founded the Wild Hawthorn Press. The imprint released much of Finlay's printed matter: from postage stamps to books to the magazine Poor. Old. Tired. Horse. Even though Finlay rarely left his home in the Pentland Hills of Lanarkshire, Wild Hawthorn Press patiently built an international context and distribution channel for his extensive collaborations and

concretist experimentations. Most of the rest of his work was also self-published — in the form of site-specific garden inscriptions.

• • •

Having borrowed enough money, Nikki Giovanni arranged to publish her first book of poetry, *Black Feelings, Black Talk* in 1968. Within months it had sold more than 10,000 copies, galvanising debates across the political spectrum over how the literature of Black Power could, and should, operate.

• • •

Ezra Pound self-published his first book of poetry, *A Lume Spento*, in 1908. He priced the hundred copies of the edition at around 6 pence, hawking them himself. In the end he gave most of them away.

• • •

In 1982 the literary pirate Kathy Acker paid for the publication of her novel *Great*

Expectations. In a hand-written letter to her friend Paul Buck, she spoke candidly of the challenges that her venture in self-publishing involved:

> The writing gets more and more complex, convoluted, thoughts on surfaces thoughts; Well, no one will read me. The present. Of course (there goes my ink supply) – of course sent you a copy of GREAT EXPECTATIONS (at least the publisher did tell me if you don't get its because the publisher is fucking up on every account) – about that part of GREAT EXPECTATIONS I put my own money into it (this is my new nightmare) but didn't want to seem like Vanity publishing, so got a friend who was starting a publishing company to back the book in name only. This 'friend' (Vale who does Research) hands the book to a printer plus all my money up front with no contract. I found another pen! The printer does 300 copies of the book, refuses to do more, keeps the money, won't give back the

> boards. Meanwhile the book's getting great reviews!

• • •

Emily Dickinson's fascicles: almost one thousand poems, all self-published in handmade booklets and privately archived.

• • •

When he was thirty-one, John Ruskin had his first book of verse privately published in an edition of fifty presentation copies financed by his doting father. Half were bound in green cloth with a gilt lyre device blocked on the cover, half in purple with the lyre blind debossed, for female and male readers, respectively. *Poems* [London: Spottiswoodes and Shaw, 1850], was already considered the *rara avis* of Ruskiniana by his wisest and smartest nineteenth-century bibliographers. Ruskin's juvenilia got a late start compared to the precocious verse of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, however, whose proud father had

privately printed fifty copies of her *Battle of Marathon* [London: Gold and Walton for W. Lindsell, 1820]. Browning's small octavo contains an epic seventy-page pastiche of Pope's translation of Homer, which she had been reading since the age of nine. She was scarcely a teenager.

• • •

On her thirty-third birthday, Virginia Woolf and her husband agreed on three resolutions: they would purchase a bull dog, to be christened John; they would purchase a house in Richmond named Hogarth; and they would purchase a handpress, to be named after the house. No further mention is made of John, but the Hogarth Press is now justly legendary. In addition to the work of T. S. Eliot and Sigmund Freud, the press published Woolf's own *Two Stories* (1917) and all of her most important novels: *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *The Waves* (1931), and *Between the Acts* (posthumously, 1941).

II. Praxis

The Hogarth Press not only published Woolf's texts, it also profoundly affected her sense of writing itself, which she came to see not as a transparent vehicle for thought, but rather as something physical, material, opaque, resistant, exacting — the analogue of hard metal and staining ink under exhaustingly exerted manual pressure.

Today, the digital files packeted and torrenting about the Internet are again changing our sense of what constitutes writing. No less physical, despite the new ease with which it can be manipulated and visualized, language is still understood as something fundamentally material: something to be clicked and cut

and pasted, peeled from one programme and poured into another, uploaded and downloaded, filtered with searches, archived and shared. Language as binary code in movement from drive to server to drive.

The most interesting writers today, accordingly, are taking the technological imperatives of the age of fibre-optics and deploying them as compositional strategies: appropriating, reframing, and repurposing texts from our vast cultural database of found language. Innovative writing need no longer be predicated on generating new text; intelligent plagiarism is sufficient. The impulse is not new — no less than James Joyce said: "I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors and paste man for that seems to me a harsh but not unjust description" — but the ease and scale of scissoring and pasting are unprecedented.

At the same time, the opportunities for self-publishing have also increased. "Non-traditional" publishing increased by 169% last year. Indeed, the new writing is often essentially coextensive with its publication, as tweeting, blogging, texting, file-sharing, casting, streaming and countless webpages attest. With platforms for self-publishing today being so much cheaper and easier than letterpress was for Leonard and Virginia Woolf, there are fewer and fewer excuses for not distributing your work — no inky fingers, no strained back, and you don't have to agree on the bulldog either.

After seeing what some of the most renowned writers have done for themselves, show what you can do. Get online; cut and paste; search and destroy; share and share alike. Remember the lessons of literary history. Don't wait for others to validate your ideas. *Do it yourself.*

—INFORMATION AS MATERIAL, June 2011

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